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ABSTRACT

Colin Badger was an adult educator who contributed to Victorian adult education in Australia. After graduating from the University of Adelaide in 1936, Badger became a tutor for the South Australian Workers Education Association (WEA), where he became aware of the possibilities of adult education. After study in London, he returned to Australia to work first as a Reader's Counselor part of a University of Western Australia scheme to encourage adult reading funded by the Carnegie Corporation and then as the university's Director of Adult Education. In 1939 he became the Director of Extension at the University of Melbourne in Victoria, where he transformed the WEA curriculum and, in 1945, formed the Council of Adult Education (CAE) a statutory authority responsible for coordinating and delivering Victorian adult education. Badger then began a quarter century of sustained adult education innovation, and his initiatives always included one or more of these three themes: extension and recreational education; the visual and performing arts; and national adult education coordination. In the late 1950s he participated in the creation of the Australian Association of Adult Education (AAAE). (The author emphasizes Badger's life as a lesson on the capacity of an individual to author historical change and points out that his life is a reminder of the role of the historian in rescuing historical authorship from obscurity. Contains 26 references.) (MO)

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# "My business was not with lost souls and the underprivileged": The Contribution of Colin Badger (1906-1993) to Adult Education in Victoria, Australia

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**Abstract: The paper is a narrative of the contribution of Colin Badger to Victorian adult education and the founding of the Council of Adult Education. Theoretical issues are raised about individual agency and historical change, and the place of narrative history in adult education research.**

## Introduction

In 1991 Colin Badger wrote that it "is too early to attempt a critical assessment of my work for and influence on Australian adult education… That must wait until a detached and scholarly historian of adult education in Australia emerges" (Badger, 1991, p. 17). Whether or not this writer and historian is "detached" or "scholarly", or even emergent, is contestable, given a general theoretical and methodological abandonment of certitude in relation to research objectivity and acknowledgment that historical narratives are inevitably shaped by the writer's contemporaneity and biography (Berkhofer, Jr., 1995; Dean, 1994; Rushbrook, 1995). This paper, nevertheless, eight years after Badger's death, is a first attempt at such an assessment.

A curious feature of late 20th Century and third millennium educational research is the absence of human agency in constructing contemporary events. This is often the result of studies that anonymously and statistically batch human endeavour or ascribe action to the influence of abstract and collective social and cultural discourses. Such an approach is at odds with the methodology of the narrative historian who seeks to place a central focus on "man [sic.] not circumstances" (Stone, 1979, p. 3). This paper permits and seeks to recognise an ontological individualism that assumes "that what happens in the world is the result of action, that the agency of action is the individual, and that while action may be constrained and influenced in various ways individuals are free to choose" (Roberts, 1996, p. 223).

A danger in focusing on the capacity of a named individual to author history is to reinvent "The Great Man" approach to historical authorship, one Nietzschian disciples would no doubt applaud. Agency, however, takes many forms (Giddens, 1991; Waters, 1994, pp. 15-55). At one extreme, and echoing Nietzsche's "Superman", Max Weber wrote of the charismatic leader who "seizes the task that is adequate for him [sic.] and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his [sic.] mission" (Gerth and Mills, 1970, p. 246). At the other are E. P. Thompson's working class heroes whom he rescued "from the enormous condescension of posterity", a theoretical turn from his contemporaries who tended to "obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts, to the making of history" (Thompson, 1984, p.12).

Colin Badger falls between these extremes. Without doubt charismatic and certainly a populist, but lacking any romantic notions of working

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class nobility, he was, as Koestler wrote of epochal change agents, a "Sleepwalker" or "crystallizer of thought" (Koestler, 1968, p. 213). Like a crystal forming on string in a solution of saturated salts, so did Badger distil and transform the ideas of his age-not a "Superman" but nevertheless extraordinary. And, like a sleepwalker, he could not predict where his journey would lead.

**Early life**

If the philosophy of adult education is underpinned by a commitment to lifelong learning, then Badger's early biography provided fertile ground for later introspection. He was born Robert Colin, the eighth of eleven children, on 4 December 1906 in Peterborough, South Australia. Of humble Scottish background, his father was a haberdasher, the son of a pioneer Baptist missionary. His mother was of Irish descent and a "marvellous woman of great strength and character" (Johnson, 1988). The children grew on a diet of thrift, the work ethic, the poetry of Robert Burns and lessons from a "tattered Bible" (Badger, 1984, p. 10).

In 1916 the Badgers moved to Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, after drought and declining farm incomes forced the closure of the haberdashery. The city's library and second-hand bookshops fed young Colin's growing interest in literature. Living in a large family of modest circumstances, the children "were all expected to pull [their] own weight" (Johnson, 1988). Colin worked in a bookshop, then as a laboratory assistant and librarian at the University of Adelaide. His family's involvement with the Baptist Church led him to a "call" to minister and in 1926 he enrolled as a student in the state's Baptist College. Through the college, and between pastoral obligations, he was permitted to study for a degree in history and philosophy (Johnson, 1988). He completed the course in 1931, though through an administrative quirk of the University of Adelaide he was not permitted to graduate until he matriculated from high school, achieved in 1936. While studying he was taught and influenced by eminent historian Keith Hancock. Hancock's Honours program introduced the precocious student to the canonical European philosophers and gave him a sense of historical place (Badger, 1984, pp. 28-31; Hancock, 1954, pp. 108-113). In 1929 he married Stella Slade, a nurse and his lifelong friend and mentor (Badger, 1989, pp. 80-84).

Realising clerical life was not for him, Badger found his way into adult education "through one of the many seemingly accidental chains of circumstances which have made up the pattern of my life." His desire to learn and love of books led him to the South Australian Workers Education Association (WEA) bookshop. Conceived in the nineteenth century England as a site for worker enlightenment, the WEA movement in the early 1930s was regarded by organised labour 'with bland indifference" and had become, in Badger's view, "predominantly a middle class organisation" (Badger, 1984, p. 34). He saw in the organisation, however, great potential. In a transfer of his missionary calling, he reflected that his serendipidous education encouraged in him the pursuit of a "fuller life". His journey of self-enlightenment led to an emerging obligation to foster a love of learning in others, particularly those "who had missed the chance to learn in their early years." In language that pervades his writing, he commented: "I never lost this sense of obligation: I was not engaged in a mere job; it was a crusade…[a] sense of mission, the fervent desire to save souls, so to speak…" (Badger, 1984, p.36). Work in Adelaide as a WEA tutor confirmed both the limitations of the WEA and the possibilities of adult education (Johnson, 1988; Badger, 1991, pp. 1-2).

But Adelaide and the WEA failed to sustain his career restlessness. Following Hancock's advice he enrolled and was accepted into the London School of Economics where he commenced a postgraduate thesis on nineteenth century Italian politics. He travelled several times through Italy and experienced the unease of Mussolini's government. In England he observed closely the WEA and met some its leading protagonists, including R. H. Tawney. Lack of income and difficulty in securing research materials led him to conclude that he was not destined for a life in academia either. At thirty he realised that if he was to have any career at all "it must be in adult education" (Badger, 1984, p. 41).

He returned to Adelaide where he tutored at the university until offered a job in Perth, Western Australia, as a Reader's Counsellor, part of a University of Western Australia scheme to encourage adult reading and funded by the Carnegie Corporation. The scheme sent books in boxes to reading groups scattered across the vast state. Badger's success in promoting the scheme led to his appointment as the university's Director of Adult Education. He extended the reading program to include summer schools and a travelling series of discussion groups and evening classes. A plan to form an association of present and past students failed. In 1939, after three years in his position, he concluded that Perth offered limited prospects and applied successfully for the job of Director of Extension at the University of Melbourne in Victoria (Johnson, 1988; Badger, 1984, pp. 42-46). The appointment was a watershed. His lifework and true calling had begun.


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## Creating the Council of Adult Education

The WEA that greeted Badger in Melbourne was in a sorry state. There existed an acrimonious relationship between the previous Director of Extension and the current WEA secretary and classes were poorly patronised. Given that the university was responsible for providing tutors and classes, and the WEA a student body and overall management, the situation was both tense and unproductive (Badger, 1991). Combined with a hostile Victorian Trades Hall Council that "wanted nothing to do with the WEA", believing it to be an "anti-working class institution out to subvert the workers" (Johnson, 1988), the future for the WEA appeared bleak. That Trades Hall had its own workers' college (established in WWI) further confirmed Badger's view that the WEA required both radical reform and a new constituency (Stephan, 1992, pp. 1-27). In later life he concluded that "my business was not with lost souls and the underprivileged: in so far as my efforts succeeded, it was because they satisfied the needs of a quite different stratum of society from that to which they [ie the WEA] were ostensibly directed" (Badger, 1984, p. 44).

Over WWII (1939-1945) Badger quietly but firmly transformed the WEA curriculum fare. In addition to an intense but modified traditional diet of academic politics, economics and philosophy he introduced folk dancing, practical music, handicrafts, foreign languages and a range of artistic pursuits. He also introduced Western Australian styled discussion groups. The WEA, he claimed, became "a much more cultural outfit" (Johnson, 1988). His changes, though, met with resistance from long-participating WEA members (Stephan, 1992). Badger's wartime activity at the University was broken by a secondment to the Australian Army Education Service (AAES), led by Colonel (later Professor) R. B. Madgwick, and other related service work (Badger, 1984, pp. 69-72). Madgwick regarded the AAES as an Australian experiment to combat illiteracy and a search for alternative pathways to formal education (Spaull, 1982, pp. 249-255). His work made an indelible impression on Badger.

At the end of 1945 Badger's pragmatic individualism and educational vision were given, in his words, a "lucky break" (Johnson, 1988) following the election of a sympathetic Labor government, led by Premier John Cain (White, 1982). Labor's two-year reign and its Fabian inspired reform program provided a confluence of circumstances that permitted Badger to inform the 1946 legislation that created the Council of Adult Education (CAE). The Act established the CAE as a statutory authority responsible for coordinating and delivering Victorian adult education. Its innovatory structure was claimed as a world first (Badger, 1984, pp. 199-215; Rushbrook, 1995, pp.171-172). From October 1948 the now defunct WEA was renamed the Adult Education Association, a student body affiliated with the CAE (Stephan, pp. 28-40). While Badger provided and sustained the vision, he was shrewd enough to surround himself with highly capable disciples who possessed the required political massaging, organisation building and creative skills. Two examples illustrate Badger's acumen. Frank Crean, member of the Cain government and founding president of the Victorian Fabian Society, became the CAE's first chairperson, holding the position until 1973 when demands as Treasurer in the federal Whitlam Labor government forced his resignation (Badger, 1973; Browne, 1985, p. 42; Mathews, 1993). Crean adeptly handled the politics of sustaining the small organisation in the face of competing funding demands from the larger schools sector, long after the Cain government lost office (Rushbrook, 1993). The task of creating a sound administrative structure was allocated to former Treasury officer John Cope, the CAE's first employee. Cope accomplished the task brilliantly, given Badger's observation that there "was no precedent for a body like to CAE to follow. It was a wholly new creature" (Badger, 1984a, p. 3; CAE ). Other strategic appointments followed.

## Building the Council of Adult Education

Presented with a blank slate, Badger began a quarter century of sustained adult education innovation. He regarded his mission as "quite revolutionary…I was trying to correct what I thought had been a devastation of Victorian cultural and intellectual life as a result of the two great depressions¾1893 and then the 1930s depression¾and of the First World War" (Rushbrook, 1993, p. 5). Ever the charismatic presence and imbued with a self-confessed "missionary zeal", his infectiousness drew in luminaries from across the university and arts sectors. Making the most of Crean's skills, Badger cleverly located CAE activities in the country as well as the city, assuaging possible criticism from the sceptical and conservative Country Party, a minor party with major influence in post-WWII government (Rushbrook, 1993, p. 7).

Badger's initiatives always included one or more of three themes: extension and recreational education, the visual and performing arts, and national adult education coordination. From the esoteria of early WEA classes the CAE offerings were nothing if not eclectic. Sculpture,



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weaving, travel, Australian history, philosophy and theatre appreciation, and more, appeared¾open to all, fee-paying and non-award. The revered Ola Cohn may have taken sculpture classes. Artist Mirka Mora may have offered expert design and color ideas for budding painters. Future governor-general and legal doyen (Sir) Zelman Cowan may have run a session on politics. Manning Clark or Ian Turner, two of Australia's great historians, may have presented a local history workshop. Jim Cairns¾academic, peace activist and an Australian Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister¾may have offered a commentary on international relations (CAE Annual Reports 1947-1971). The Box Scheme grew from strength to strength and remains strong today (Badger, 1991, pp. 20-22). From the early-1960s Badger spread his CAE philosophy to rural areas through auspicing many independent community education centres, the first opening at Wangaratta in 1962 (Badger, 1984, pp. 128-133). A series of mobile "Brains Trusts" and summer schools only added to the rich brew. People from all walks of life, particularly women denied access to further education by the patriarchal conventions of post-WWII society, benefited immeasurably and were encouraged to pursue more formal studies (Rushbrook, 1993b; Rushbrook, 1995, pp. 172-73).

Badger's encouragement of the arts was equally extraordinary. Apart from being active in the creation of the literary journal Meanjin and the Melbourne Theatre Company, he sought through the CAE to popularise the performing and visual arts. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, until killed by television, a bus called the "Monster" roamed the Victorian countryside. It carried actors, sets and crew to deliver a wide range of plays through the Travelling Theatre scheme. Equally innovative was a collaborative venture with the National Gallery that created the Arts Train. European and Australian collections regularly visited all corners of the state (Rushbrook, 1993a).

Though Badger was active in the later 1950s in creating the highly successful Australian Association of Adult Education (AAAE), he did not regard it as a personal triumph. He thought its final shape did not reflect the needs of adult learners and educators, and on many occasions he challenged the WEA model that guided adult education in other states. He was regarded by some, ironically it seems-given his admiration of things Italian-as Machiavellian, and by himself as needing more patience, less assurance about his own good intentions and more willingness to listen to others (Badger, 1991, p. vi; Badger, 1984, p. 145). He left the AAAE not long after its formation. It was an issue that concerned him many years after his retirement in 1971 (Johnson, 1988).

## Conclusion

What, then, can be concluded about Colin Badger's steerage of Victorian adult education? At least three salient points, among many others, should be made. First, his example is an inspiring lesson on the capacity of an individual to author historical change. Until he took last breath on 8 August 1993 he retained and further developed his life-forged adult learning philosophy. Perhaps his actions may be seen as a form of soft-liberalism that "lucked-out" in the mid-1940s through a happy confluence with Labor's Fabianism. Or, more realistically, as the shrewd machinations of a pragmatist who played a political system to his advantage. Whatever the circumstances, the CAE "worked". Second, Badger's life is a reminder of the role of the historian in rescuing historical authorship from obscurity. In a world of anonymous policymaking it is useful to know that organisations sometimes began with souls. Third, the CAE's early days are a reminder to the CAE itself of what has been lost. Economic rationalism, and perhaps Weber's observation that once charismatic leaders move on, rigidity and bureaucracy move in, has significantly curtailed the CAE's innovative capacities. Badger's spirit, however, still energizes those who remember.

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